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The danger of 'the truth'

Liv S. Gaborit

Abstract: This comment applauds Held's argument for the importance of considering the risk of epistemological violence implicit in psychology. In addition, the comments suggests the argument can be furthered by looking to the ontological turn within anthropology, and considering not only the risk of epistemic, but of ontological violence in psychological research as well as in therapeutic practice. Lastly, the comment questions whether academics, in their often privileged positions will ever be able to go beyond the structural violence of hegemonic structures or if change should come from below.

Barbara Held (2019) must be complimented for drawing our attention towards the harms we as researchers and psychologists risk inflicting unintentionally. Often such debates are closely connected with the process of conducting empirical research and presented as ethical reflections upon how we act in the lab or in the field. Held however brings the debate to theoretical psychology and calls us to reflect upon the effect of the knowledge we create. While Held sets out on an admirable venture to explore the unintended epistemic violence psychological theorists exert on the people whom they are trying to help, she limits the potential of her argument by arguing the violence is on an epistemic level and by sticking closely to the ideal of 'the truth'. Though she argues for the potential of more pragmatic and relativist approaches to generate knowledge *for* rather than *about* people and rightly points out the shortcomings of such approaches, the objective truth remains an undercurrent in her argument throughout the article.

Indeed Held is correct in flagging the issue of the kinds of unintended harm psychologists exert through science and therapy (Jefferson, 2003), but the argument is weakened by the fact that she stays within the structures ingrained with such harm. Her argument would be strengthened by looking to the ontological turn in anthropology, which argues that these are not only epistemic differences, but ontological differences which create different versions of the world (Mol, 2002). For example, when I as a psychologist and prison researcher create knowledge about prisons, it does not only affect prison authorities on an epistemic level, it has the potential to affect ontological possibilities within prisons. Thus, when I argue that prisoners in Myanmar hearing voices in solitary confinement and in meditation is not a symptom of individual mental illness but a result of the structural violence of confinement and isolation, I am consciously challenging a specific ontology (Gaborit, under revision). I am challenging the ontology in which mental illness is an expression for pre-existing dispositions and vulnerabilities and creating an alternative truth in which hearing voices become a logical reaction to structural violence rather than a symptom of mental illness. I create an alternative reality in which the reaction previously described as pathological becomes sane and in which it is the practice of systematically subjecting people to solitary confinement that becomes insane and unacceptable.

Through an ontological approach the search for 'the truth' in singular is suspended, while research experiments with how the world could be, depending on which ontological truths are in play (Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017). Taking Held's argument one step further by saying the knowledge we produce makes actual changes to the reality we inhabit only adds to the urgency of considering her argument. Psychological theory has the potential to change the mental and social structures of our realities and with such potential comes great responsibility.

While the ontological turn can strengthen Held's argument, it is also worth questioning whether an institution such as academia will ever be able to overcome the structural violence inherent in such an elitist institution. In my own research, I am confronted with the stark differences between my privileged position as a white woman who grew up in a highly developed and affluent country, where education was free and I was

allowed to rise to the level of PhD while being fully supported by the state, and the position of those I do research for and about. My research is concerned with people from countries where quality education is scarce if at all existing and where many struggle for daily subsistence. It is concerned with people who have a different kind of knowledge than me, a knowledge about how to survive hardships I can hardly imagine. In my work, I try to learn from them and translate their knowledge to a form which the academic world can relate to. As in any act of translation, this translation slightly alters the meaning of the content. To diminish this distortion, and the epistemic and ontological violence it might bring about, I do research *with* and *for* prisoners rather than just about. But time and time again, I see myself coming up short with regards to working according to their needs and wishes as I answer to the demands of academia. The knowledge created in scientific publications is accessible only to the privileged few. Even the knowledge in open access articles is only accessible to those who understand (English) academic language. If we were truly to challenge hegemonic power structures and their inherent structural violence, it is not enough to move from knowledge *about* to knowledge *for*, from research object, to research subject and co-researcher. To challenge such structures we need an egalitarian system in which those who are the topic of research are enabled to raise their voice as authors, to research *by* those who live through the experiences that are being researched. One example of such practices is that of convict criminologists, former prisoners who write about the experiences of those who go through imprisonment. To counter the risk of epistemological or ontological violence in psychological research and therapeutic practice, more voices must be heard and it is our responsibility to encourage and support those with fewer privileges and enable them to share their knowledge and question the hegemonic truths.

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